

# HIFICRITIC



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# Rocking with Unity

UNITY AUDIO'S *THE ROCK* IS A MINI MONITOR THAT BRIDGES THE HI-FI/PRO-AUDIO DIVIDE RATHER EFFECTIVELY. RAFAEL TODES REPORTS WHILE MARTIN COLLOMS ADDS MEASUREMENT BACKUP



Unity Audio is something of the poacher turned gamekeeper. Having distributed professional audio equipment and lived with the strengths and weaknesses of others' efforts for many years, it decided to design and build its own audio equipment, starting with this actively driven mini monitor.

*The Rock* actually comes in two versions, one 'hair shirt' model aimed primarily at professional users, and a more refined (and necessarily more costly) variation for the hi-fi marketplace. Helping to justify its substantial £3,540/pair pricetag, this Hi-Fi version uses graded and matched components and cryogenically treated OFC internal cables, and comes finished in high gloss piano black. As is so often the case, some degree of ongoing development takes place, the latest tweak being an altered feedback loop in the LF amp module which now puts the bass -3dB point at 40Hz instead of 50Hz.

The speakers bear some resemblance to the similar size Elac *BS244* bookshelf speakers, which is not surprising as *The Rock* uses similar drive units. However, this two-way design is actively driven and operates with sealed box loading. The enclosure is the work of studio designer and acoustician Kevin Van Green, while the active electronics have been created by Tim de Paravincini (of EAR fame).

The tweeter is a folded ribbon AMT (air motion transformer), a design invented by Dr Oskar Heil and first introduced in 1973. Here it is placed between the poles of a strong neodymium magnet. The design minimises diaphragm movement, which provides fine headroom and transient response with low distortion. In my experience of the Elac bookshelf speakers, this is manifest in a sweeter treble. The Elac woofer is a 180mm paper-pulp design, bonded to a thin sheet of aluminium, 0.2mm thick, said to control the break-up modes. The relatively wide rubber surround has a double fold to assist at low frequencies.

The amplifier section is a traditional class A/B, discrete component, linear bi-polar type providing 70W to the bass/mid unit and 30W to the tweeter. A Corian front baffle adds solidity to the look of the speaker, and the highly polished black finish provides an aesthetic touch of real class. Unity has used top grade 12mm, 9-ply Baltic birch ply rather than MDF for the cabinet. Additional bracing is included for the sake of cabinet rigidity. Mains is supplied via a fused IEC socket, alongside an on/off switch and a green LED, and a gain control; both a

balanced XLR and a single-ended gold-plated RCA/phono sockets are provided for signal connection.

## Sound Quality

Listening began with some trusted and familiar vinyl: a Philips recording of Raymond Leppard conducting Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No 1*, and I was immediately struck by the clarity of the midrange. (I used an Inspire *Monarch* turntable with SME *V* tonearm, Ortofon *Cadenza Bronze* cartridge, through an Icon Audio *PS3* phono stage and a Townshend *Allegri* pre-amp.) The sound is not the classic monitor-type sound that I'd expect from a Pro-Audio device: it has a gentle, slightly soft-focus effect, which is pleasant and unfatiguing to listen to. The bass times well in the frequency range required from most of this recording, which is something one would expect: a closed box unit is likely to have limited bass output but little time-smear. The quality of bass doesn't match up to the capabilities of my reference B&W *802Ds*, but they're many times the price, and all told I'm quite impressed at how the *Unity Rock* punches above its size in the bass department.

Casting my mind back to the Event *Opal* monitors that I recently heard with the same equipment, I recall that their bass reproduction was staggeringly good for their size, but also that I found them a bit dry and analytical overall for my taste. Despite being thoroughly impressed with their performance, their starkness meant that I couldn't live with them for an extended period. The *Unity Rock* is a different animal altogether. It has an altogether more attractive and mellow sound, and produce a coherence which is revelatory at the price. It is worth noting that while they portray the beauty of this Bach orchestra, the soundstage is largish, but not holographic. There is a vague sense of where the instruments are sitting, but the imaging is not really pin-point.

Turning to the greater forces found in Dvorak's *New World Symphony* conducted by a young Leonard Bernstein on CBS, again on vinyl, the *Rocks* make a convincing stab at the dynamics called into play in the Allegro section of the first movement. The result is exciting: declamatory without becoming shouty. These speakers are really fast, and this helps them create the energy levels and precision that the music demands.

There is however a fair amount of detail lacking compared to the reference B&W *802D*, and indeed the Event *Opal*. The *Rock* puts a general

RAFAEL TODES  
MARTIN COLLOMS

mellifluousness above digging every ounce of detail from this recording. If ever an example was needed to demonstrate the essential differences between a pro-audio and a hi-fi product, comparison between *The Rock* and the *Event Opals* would do the trick admirably.

Listening across several other recordings, I started to notice some quirks and characteristics: *The Rock* reproduces piano very well, and through its immediacy and speed of response, I was reminded of how the piano is genetically a percussion instrument! *The Rock* doesn't have the largesse or scale of the B&W's sound, which has greater tonal information and presence, but this speaker is nevertheless impressive for the small volume of space it occupies. I noticed when listening to Schubert *Piano Trios* (Beaux Arts Trio on vinyl) that it copes with and reproduces small scale music much better than the fire-blazing large-scale orchestral 'symphony of a thousand'. A small quirk emerged: when listening to Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante for Four Winds*, the sound of the oboe seemed timbrally far closer to a clarinet that I am accustomed to, and the oboe's higher registers sounded a little veiled.

**Conclusions**

Having made my acquaintance with these most interesting small speakers, I am left with the strong impression that they have been thoughtfully and expertly designed. Despite the substantial pricetag of £3,540/pair, but considering the intrinsic value of the included amplification, this very sophisticated hi-fi loudspeaker is still decent value for money, though naturally the Pro-Audio version is even more competitive. The amplification lives up to the standard I've come to expect from Tim de Paravicini, the unit is attractive to look at, and is sonically capable of competing with any small bookshelf speaker I've heard at this sort of price.

**Test Results (Colloms)**

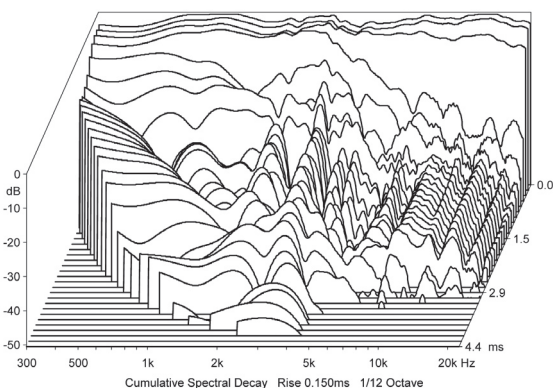
The pair match is very good in the treble, holding within +/-1dB 3kHz – 25kHz, and was also a very good +/-1.5dB range below 3kHz, indicating great driver matching. The overall frequency response 50Hz – 23kHz holds within +/-2.5dB, which is fine (if not quite as ruler flat as the graph in the brochure!) Below axis listening is clearly best avoided, but the lateral off-axis graphs are impressively consistent right out to 75degrees, even up at 10kHz.

The 64-point room average measurement clearly shows a fine in-room match, with uniform and well integrated low frequencies extending to a practical 35Hz. Output is slightly dulled in the 2-3kHz presence range, but nicely controlled with 'monitor class' energy uniformity.

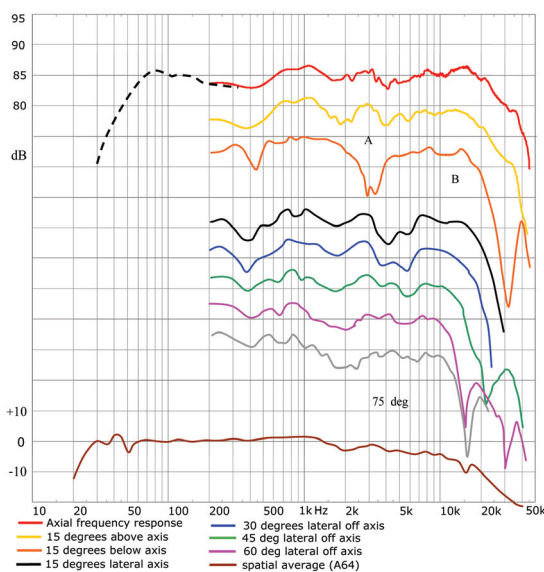
The waterfall display of energy decay with frequency the clean upper traces show good phase integration while the decay rates are rapid confirming the good transient response heard on test. Coloration is clearly quite mild.

Very little amplification hiss is audible from the drivers. I did hear some mild blowing noises from the XLR socket when only using the RCA connection, so perhaps a dummy plug could be inserted to block it.

The Rock Waterfall display of energy decay with frequency



Unity Audio Rock II 'Hi-Fi' Frequency Responses



**Unity Audio The Rock**  
(hi-fi version)

Size	220x325x290mm
Weight	11.2kg
Price	£3,540/pair



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